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James M. Lang

Assumption College, lang@assumption.edu

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ADVICE

Do Photos of Teaching on Your Campus Look Staged and Static?

By James M. Lang | MAY 22, 2018



Martin Springborg

This photograph, taken by Martin Springborg, depicts a roomful of students standing and working at various boards. Their professor seems almost peripheral to the action.

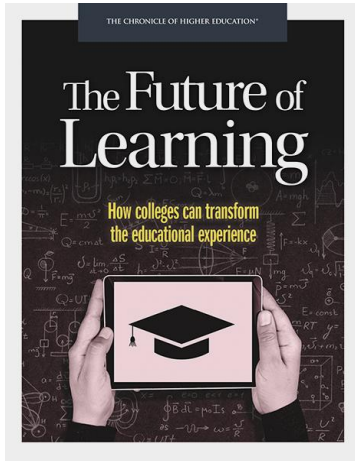
For something that happens almost every hour of every day, teaching is awfully hard to photograph. And learning may be transformational, but images of it are often downright dull.

Cassandra Volpe Horii ran into that problem at the California Institute of Technology in 2012 when she was hired to create its Center for Teaching, Learning, and Outreach. Looking for photos to use on the center's new website, she combed through the university's images of teaching and learning.

"Almost everything I could find," she said, "showed a professor in front of a chalkboard full of equations and rows of passive students."

While she was looking for photos, Horii also was meeting with Caltech students, TAs, and faculty members, observing classes, and getting to know the teaching culture of the place. She soon realized that all those repetitive sage-on-the-stage images did not match what Caltech students were actually experiencing in their courses, both within and outside of a physical classroom.

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ADD TO CART

Horii had two key aims for the new center: (1) Find and share examples of inventive teaching that were already happening on the campus, and (2) start conversations about new innovations. The stale photographs struck her as an obstacle to both objectives.

She already knew about the work of Martin Springborg, who has been photographing the college classroom for more than a decade via his Teaching and Learning Project. Horii thought he would be the ideal partner to help Caltech present a more accurate and compelling vision of its pedagogy — one that better reflected faculty creativity and passion.

The fruits of their collaboration are on display in a unique exhibition that opened in April, combining photographs from the institution's archives with Springborg's newly created images. I had the opportunity to visit Caltech this spring during its annual TeachWeek, and to admire the vision of this effort to show, rather than tell, how teaching and learning happens on the campus.

The exhibit photographs offer diverse visions of the teaching-learning transaction, just as Horii intended. Many of them upend the traditional trope we are so accustomed to seeing: Instead of students arrayed in rows, staring thoughtfully at a professor who is dispensing wisdom from the front of the room, the images portray Caltech students as agents in classrooms and laboratories, actively shaping their own learning experiences.

One striking image of Springborg's depicts a roomful of students standing and working at various boards; the professor, off in the right corner of the photograph, seems almost peripheral. The faces and body language of the students reflect the range of emotions in the room — from the students who are writing confidently on the board to the ones who are observing with puzzled looks and gestures. The image reveals a classroom alive with energy and curiosity.

The photographs selected from the Caltech archives are equally thought-provoking — like the 1970 image depicting a group of students gathered around a faculty member, all of them seated on benches that had been placed in knee-deep water in a reflecting pool on campus. That seemingly frivolous depiction of a professor and some students getting relief from the California heat has a deeper meaning: The professor in the image, Jenijoy La Belle, was the first female professor at Caltech — and 1970 also marked the first year when women were admitted to the institution as undergraduates.

Small Changes in Teaching

In this series, James M. Lang argues that simple changes in our pedagogy — in things like course design, classroom practices, and communication with students — can have a powerful impact on student learning.

- 'How Much Do You Want Your Final to Count?'
- Small Changes in Teaching: The Last 5 Minutes of Class
- Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections



Although the university's demographics have changed over time, both women and students of color appear in images throughout the exhibition, helping both to showcase the full spectrum of people who have passed through the gates of Caltech and to inspire new generations from diverse backgrounds to join the ranks of the nation's future scientists.

Back in 2016, Horii and Springborg wrote an article outlining their vision for this effort, and why it matters. Instead of staged, static photographs, they wanted to show "the intensity and authenticity of students and teachers in the act of advancing scientific and other forms of knowledge," and help the institution "jumpstart greater interest and discourse

about teaching."

In other words, the goal is for any professors or TAs who view these photographs to find inspiration and energy to try something new in their own classrooms. Teaching happens in such divided spaces that we might never realize the full range of possibilities for our classrooms until we can catch glimpses of the work of our colleagues. A faculty member who has become accustomed to one form of teaching might find in one of Springborg's images the motivation to step out from behind the podium and engage students in a different way.

Gathering these images, creating new ones, working through institutional channels, and hosting an exhibition were of course an enormous amount of work. Horii and Springborg believe that changing the visual story of teaching and learning has the power to make a difference in academic culture, especially when a campus needs an injection of life into the conversations about teaching and learning.

When it feels like your institution has talked teaching into a corner, a visual approach can spark renewed attention. I asked Horii what advice she would give to others interested in creating new visual stories about teaching and learning on their campuses.



Caltech Archives

Photographs of teaching tend to depict a professor at a board in front of rows of students. This more-playful archival image – of a professor and her students seeking relief from the heat at Caltech – dates to 1970.

"Start by simply examining and reflecting upon the campus's current visual narrative about teaching and learning," she said. "There is one — whether acknowledged or not — and it may or may not be expressing what's most important. Sometimes a campus's photographic story is only directed outward, and may miss the opportunity to engage the campus community itself." She added: "There are many ways to obtain new, authentic images — whether by hiring an experienced photographer, collaborating with a campus's creative departments, or empowering students and instructors to make photographs."

I returned to my own campus with a new curiosity about the stories that our images of teaching here tell, and I hope to start some conversations with my colleagues about those stories in the coming months. But I found the exhibit

inspiring in a more personal way as well. After a semester away from the classroom, I'm ready to jump back in this fall — and hope I can create the kind of energized, inclusive, and curious classrooms that Springborg and Horii helped bring to life in their exhibition at Caltech.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. He is the author of Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.